

info sheet 20



Six ways dads (and moms) can connect with teens

As parents, you know the juggling act. You're running your kids between school, extra-curricular activities, and other commitments. All of their scheduled activities leave little time for you to stay actively involved in your teen's life.

Nonetheless, despite the attention given to scheduled activities where you may not be present, youth continue to identify their parents as having a strong influence on their decision-making. In other words – you might feel like a chauffeur, but your kids think you're important!

Given limited time, here are six ways that you can positively influence their daily decision-making, impact healthy behaviors, and help today's youth to become responsible adults.

1 Eat a Daily Meal Together

Teens want to eat with their parents. "Nearly three-quarters of teens think that eating dinner frequently with their parents is very or fairly important."¹ Teens that eat meals with their parents, whether it's a late dinner or a healthy breakfast, are more likely to abstain from negative behaviors. For example, "compared to teens who have frequent family dinners, those who have infrequent family dinners are:



- Twice as likely to have used tobacco;
- Almost twice as likely to have used alcohol; and
- One and half times likelier to have used marijuana."¹

The message is clear: food (eaten together) is a good way to your child's heart. But it's not just the food that makes a difference, it's all of the connections, conversations, and confidences that you can share by keeping regular contact through mealtime.

2 Avoid the Petty Back-and-Forth (Power struggles don't help.)

It's easy to engage in conflicts around "pet peeves" and other small debates that don't amount to much in the bigger world. As the adult (and parent), try to stay above the fray. "The key to successful parenting is to know which battles are worth tackling. Concentrate only on those issues that genuinely need your attention to protect your teen's well-being."²

One way to handle these inevitable debates/disagreements is to "decide on a few non-negotiable rules. These can be as simple as 'no television until homework is finished,' or 'put dirty clothes in the hamper.' When a teen pushes back, don't argue over details or negotiate. Simply say, 'Sorry, that is against the family rules.' Teens will try and outwit us or start an argument. Don't over-explain, and don't renegotiate. Just remind them of the rule."²

At the same time, remember that "it's normal for a teen to argue for the sake of arguing. Believe it or not, teens can find arguing exciting. As they grow, they are developing new skills in thinking and logic. This means that arguments with you aren't necessarily about winning, but rather experiencing the *art* of an argument. Fun, isn't it?"²

And finally, it's important to give yourself space. If you're feeling angry or disappointed, sleep on it. In the morning, you can talk with your teen with a clearer, less emotional, mind.

3 Talk with Them Often and Early

Open communication is a strength for any relationship and this is equally true for parent-teen engagement. Often, many parents feel anxiety about discussing serious topics whether it's drug use, smoking, or sexual activity.

Tips for parents to develop and maintain strong relationships with teenage sons and daughters

Our mission

The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network enhances healthy father-child relationships by promoting initiatives that inform public policy and further develop the field of fatherhood practitioners statewide.

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Leading Minnesota's campaign for healthy fatherhood.

"Experience tells us that most parents want to talk openly with their children about sexuality, but often feel ill-prepared to do so. When to start? What to say? How to express the personal values and beliefs you want so much to share with your children?"³ Here are two good places to get some of the language you'll need to talk confidently about sexuality: www.noplacelikehome.org and www.itsthateasy.org.

Many parents fear that talking about these topics will lead to an interest in engaging in the behavior. This simply is not true. Furthermore, research shows that youth "want to hear about sex education from their own moms, dads and guardians. But did you know that when you teach your child the facts about sex, your child is:

- Less likely to have sexual intercourse as a teen;
- Less likely to become pregnant or get someone pregnant as a teen; and
- More likely to talk to you about important issues in his or her life."⁴

4 Tell Them When You Disapprove

It can be difficult to start a conversation about your expectations for your daughters or sons, especially in relation to their drug/alcohol use, smoking, sexual relations, or other "adult" topics (see #3, above). Nonetheless, expressing clear expectations – and telling them that you disapprove of specific actions – is an important step. "Both the Search Institute and the Minnesota Student Survey consistently show that students who report their parents would disapprove of their use [of alcohol or drugs] report lower rates of consumption."⁵

And the opposite is also true. "Teens who think their fathers are okay with their drinking are likelier to drink and get drunk than teens who believe their fathers are against their drinking. Teens who have seen their parent(s) drunk are likelier to drink, get drunk, and try cigarettes and marijuana, compared to teens who have not seen their parent(s) drunk."¹

SOURCES: This brief identifies ways for parents to strengthen parent-child relationships. The following resources provide other good tips for parents who may be struggling with difficult situations.

¹ National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, www.casacolumbia.org

² Minn. Institute of Public Health, Shoulder to Shoulder, www.shouldertoshoulderminnesota.org

³ Planned Parenthood of SW Oregon, www.noplacelikehome.org

⁴ Campaign for Our Children, www.cfoc.org

⁵ Fall 2009 Presentation, "We Can Parent Together", Minnesota Prevention Resource Center, www.mprc.org

Teens want their parents to act like parents. They say that "parents are their number one choice for support and information."⁶ Setting clear boundaries and enforcing rules are two ways to offer healthy support to teens.

5 Be on Your Teen's Side

Just like the rest of us, teens aspire to be accepted and respected. Specific and honest praise is one good way to show teens that you approve of them. Whether it's through a simple thumbs up as they leave for a new job or a congratulatory text message after a long week at school, your small efforts can go a long way toward building their feelings of respect and esteem. Remember to *keep it real*. Generic praise, "nice job", is much less helpful than specific praise, "I like how you told your friends that your family is important to you."

"Unfortunately, some adults tend to brush off what adolescents are going through with trivial comments like 'it's only. . .'; 'you're just going through a stage'; or 'your life is easy now, just wait until you are an adult'. Adults need to make an effort to be more understanding and accepting of all teen feelings and experiences."⁶

6 Recognize Every Child is Different

As a parent, you are blessed with a unique child who – despite the challenges – has many positive qualities. No two teens are alike. Some teens will want to spend time with parents. Some won't. Some will thrive in the high school environment. Some will bide their time and never feel comfortable in high school. Some will want to start dating early. Other teens will be reluctant or may take more time to figure out their sexuality. As a parent, learn to support your teen in positive ways, no matter who he or she is becoming. The support and love of caring parents are important factors in helping your child to grow in confidence, healthy attitudes, and life skills.

⁶ University of Minnesota Extension, www.extension.umn.edu

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